

A Time in the Wilderness

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, February 25, 2007.

I took my first wilderness trip in Glacier National Park, high in the Rockies between Montana and Canada, straddling the Continental Divide. Glacier is backpacking country. Humans intrude as little as possible in this gorgeous wilderness, so to experience this place you need to backpack through several miles of mountainous trails from one tiny campsite to another. Growing up in urban California, I had never gone camping, but I was excited to see Glacier, and I packed for a good time. In my brand-new backpack, I stuffed, among other things: four designer outfits, three pairs of shoes, a stuffed animal, three books, makeup, jewelry, and a bag of chocolate. I did, however, neglect to bring any rain gear. By the third day of carrying this 40-pound pack in the pouring rain, wearing a Hefty garbage bag as a poncho, I was ready to throw my stuff to the bears in exchange for their fur coat. But at the end of that trip, I knew what I really needed, and what I just wanted. In some ways, I found out who I was.

Luke says that after Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River, he is led by the Spirit in the wilderness. Matthew says this too, but Mark tells us that the Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness. The four gospel writers, having different perspectives, give us four different versions of the story – a little like our newspapers today. Matthew is always careful to quote his sources and make sure that everything is just right. He is solid and reliable, like our *Wall Street Journal*. Mark is the gospel where everything Jesus does is urgent. Immediately Jesus goes into the wilderness. He doesn't just go, he is driven there. The headlines are four inches high – Mark is the *Cincinnati Enquirer* of Palestine. Luke is the gospel of the marginalized and the outsiders. He is the kind one, who talks about lost sheep and lost sons. Here the Spirit gently takes Jesus by the hand in the wilderness. Luke, the Nazareth *Village Voice*. Then there is John. John's Jesus is always preaching. "Give us bread," say the people, and Jesus gives them a talk about being the bread of life. "Give me water," says the woman, and Jesus talks about being living water. In John, Jesus always knows what he's doing and doesn't need any wilderness experience, so you won't find this story there. John, the *New Yorker* magazine of Jerusalem.

But Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us that Jesus ends up in the wilderness after he is baptized. I go with Mark – the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness. Now why would God do that? I can't answer for God, or for Jesus, but it seems that before he begins his ministry, before he preaches his first word, Jesus has a lot of decisions to make about what his baptism means, about who he is, and what God wants of him. He needs to decide what his ministry should be all about. He needs to know before he begins his mission what he should, and should not, do.

So Jesus, left to think things over all by himself, has some ideas about what he might do with his life. After a while, his brainstorming turns into an inner struggle as he tries to decide whether to focus on satisfying his people's physical needs, or end their political oppression by being their just ruler, or to draw people to God through compelling and charismatic leadership. What we read from the gospels was more likely Jesus' internal dialogue that he may have shared with his disciples, rather than an actual conversation with somebody who just popped up on a rock next to Jesus. The process may have gone something like this: "So, if I am the Son of God and God's Beloved, as we all heard while I was coming out of the river, maybe I could turn these stones into bread and feed the people. Then nobody would be hungry! That's how I can bring good

news to the poor! But is that what my God and Father in heaven really wants of me? Is that my calling – to satisfy people’s physical hunger? Well, why not? It’s a good thing to strive for. But it’s not the highest good for me. People will be satisfied with loaves and fishes, and then I will miss giving the highest good that I can give, and being the highest good – the one who will satisfy their hunger for God. Yes, because one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God – so Deuteronomy says. And that’s who I am – the word that comes from the mouth of God.”

And because Luke did not have a computer, but was writing laboriously with his little quill and ink on a little piece of papyrus or calfskin that was hard to get and not cheap either, what we get is “Jesus answered, It is written, one does not live by bread alone.” Period. So there.

The early church recognized the proposals as prompted by Satan, so they use the language of temptation and Satan. But temptation is not just about good vs. evil. I am reminded of a scene in *The Sound of Music*, when the newly wedded Captain von Trapp and Maria have just returned from their honeymoon. They drive up to the front of their house, where a huge Nazi flag had been hung in their absence. The Captain angrily yanks the flag down, rips it in half, and throws it away. Later, his brother Max tries to tell Maria that the Captain needs to “at least pretend to work with these people. Maria, you must convince him.” Maria answers him, “Max, I can’t ask him to be less than he is.”

The decisions Jesus faces are not necessarily temptations to be evil, but temptations to be less than he is. In the wilderness, Jesus needs to decide about his absolute devotion and faithfulness to God. He needs to decide about his commitment to God and to the mission to which God calls him. Look at his responses, what he has concluded after his inner struggle: Not by bread alone but by the word of God; worship and serve only God; God is not for testing. Anything less than this absolute commitment is being less than he is. By the time his 40 days are over, he knows who he is and what he is called to be. In the wilderness of his own soul, he has decided what he needs to cultivate, and what he needs to weed out.

This is wilderness time for us, too. “It’s a jungle out there,” they say. It’s a jungle in here [in our hearts], too. Unless we weed out what is unnecessary in our life and cultivate what is necessary, we can get lost in the wilderness. This is a time to find out – who does God mean for me to be? What am I called to do? What does it mean to be a human being – *this* human being – in relationship with God? Like Jesus, this inner wilderness time is a chance for us to look at our baptism – unlike Jesus, we have a Baptismal Covenant to help us here. In a fundamental way, the Baptismal Covenant tells us who we are as followers of Christ. Taking that as my guide, am I doing what I am called to do, or do I let myself be less than I am? Am I doing the highest good for me, or am I being less than I am, as a child of God? Note the subtlety of temptation here. Our life choices are not necessarily about sin and evil – though we are of course tempted to sin. I read the Ash Wednesday Litany of Penitence regularly because it makes so clear what my daily sins are. But we can also be tempted merely to be less than ourselves, in a way that diminishes our relationship with God, or in a way that makes our faith lackadaisical, our love half-hearted, our prayers thin, and our ministry weak. It is tempting to be content with the status quo. Our promise in the Baptismal Covenant is that we will stand for the highest good.

The Episcopal Church will also enter a time of wilderness. The Church has since its beginning faced identity choices. Is it a movement just for Jews, or for everybody? Do we exclude the

unworthy, like the people who have renounced their faith under torture? Is the church a big tent with an open table, or is it an ark with its doors closed to keep the bad guys out? The Episcopal Church has until September 30 to renounce our welcome and openness to gay and lesbian people. During this period, I suspect that the church will also make critical choices about the nature of its mission. Are we an open door, or a closed gate? What is the object of our worship – a doctrine, a book, or a Person? Is it time to part ways in order to preserve goodwill? How do we fulfill our Baptismal Covenant as a church – to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of all? Is the Anglican Communion ordained by God? Is unity in the Communion the highest good?

I read the Communiqué this week with a heavy heart. The Anglican Communion is starting to look a little like the Titanic with its 1st and 2nd class passengers, and then the 3rd class passengers abandoned behind the gates when the ship sinks. And *our* sinking would be just as tragic. I know what it is like, to have to decide whether to compromise my values to hold onto longtime relationship; whether the cost of keeping a relationship is worth the welfare, and even the life, of those who are entrusted to my care. I hope we don't come to that. This is wilderness living. But after our 40 days, if we believe we are in danger of giving up our very identity as faithful Christians, if we are in danger of conceding until we have nothing left to concede and we lose everything that is dear to us – then maybe it is time to stop and reaffirm our conscience and our commitments. It will be heartbreaking if our commitment to the Anglican Communion were to be broken, but it will be heartbreaking also if our commitment to justice were to be broken.

We are asked to fast, but fasting from compassion and mercy is not God's way, and should not be our way. As Isaiah puts it, the fast that God chooses for us is "to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke." Throughout the Bible, we read that God stands with the victims of the world, the suffering and the oppressed, starting with those slaves in Egypt. And in the gospels, in story after story, when law and mercy clashed, Jesus took the way of mercy – whether it was breaking the Sabbath to heal a withered hand, or letting an adulteress go free, or hanging out with tax collectors. For Jesus, mercy was the higher good.

Jesus' way can help us here – even though, we find out, it is the way of the cross. Stand for the highest good that God calls you to. Do not be content to be less than you are. God made you to be children of God, in the image of God. Be nothing less. And honor others that way also – as nothing less than children of God in the image of God. Jesus made us one Body in him. We are not made more whole by dismembering ourselves.

To Jesus, the thought of following a lesser path was temptation, and to agree to it would have been sin. He withstood those temptations and emerged from the wilderness strengthened to do his Father's will. May we in our weakness gain strength by his strength, and as we pray and fast in our wilderness – as individuals and as the church—may we find him mighty to save. The good news is that the Spirit continues to lead us, and we can always persevere, as our Baptismal Covenant promises, "with God's help." Amen.